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Larp-Related Stress

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Coping with Larp-Related Stress

Introduction

Larping has been described as extreme social sports. In practice, larping often gives players most when players devote time to the game, expose themselves as characters to situations both pleasant and distressing and attempt to immerse themselves in the experiences. The players are expected, or expect themselves, to put quite an effort into the larp. These expectations can include **cognitive demands** (such as ability to memorize background materials and switching one's attention between relevant information during the game), **emotional demands** (for example, immersion into the character and how the character feels about the transpiring events), **physical demands** (including preparing props or doing physical feats in the game), and **social demands** (getting to know new people and adapting one's behavior to new social setting). These expectations may cause stress for the players.

Expectations are not the only source of stress in larping. For example, players may stress about whether the larp is organized in an effective and practical manner, about catering and sleeping arrangements, and even about whether they will feel lonely before, during, or after the game. Often larp related stress is centralized around the larp event and isn't expected to be prolonged.

Not all stress is harmful. Potentially stress-generating events, or **stressors**, can even be positive life events (such as a wedding or a graduation ceremony), although stress generated by positive life events is often labeled positive stress and typically has little long-term effects on well-being (e.g. Lin et al., 2013).

However, according to the models of stress by Richard Lazarus (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), when a person appraises an event as a negative or dangerous (versus positive or irrelevant), it may result in stress. In Lazarus' model, stress is a result from an imbalance between available resources to deal with the task; if task demands exceed the available resources, a person may become stressed. However, stress affects individuals in different ways: these depend on both their specific coping strategies (adaptive or constructive versus maladaptive or harmful) and how the person's individual characteristics predispose them to stress (or in other words, how resilient the person is towards adverse events).

Aspects of Larp-Related Stress

Larping is a voluntary activity, and most players look forward to larps as positive life events. Regardless, larps can be more demanding than the player expects, and thus create stress. To assess what types of demands in larps generate stress, we conducted an online survey amongst Finnish larpers with a comprehensive set of questions, to which we received more than a hundred responses. More specifically, we investigated how stressful larpers consider different situations that can occur either before, during, or after the game, and assessed what types of coping mechanisms larpers use to alleviate that stress. Respondents also answered questions probing relevant background information that might either protect from or alleviate stress (like relationship status, personality and well-being, predisposition to anxiety etc.). Finally, we looked into what types of symptoms larpers generally experience from larp-related stress.

From preliminary analysis of our data, we see eight distinct categories of larp-related stressors (see Figure 1). The category explaining most of the variance in the data was **experiences of failure**. This means stress generated by larper's own experience of not performing to the expectations either before, during, or after the game. For example, not coming up with a good enough of a backstory, forgetting relevant pieces of information during the game, or making mistakes in scenes during the game. Fear of failure seems to be one of the four highly intercorrelated stressors along with following stressor categories: **sexist and discriminatory themes in the game**, **feelings of bleed or post-low**, and **feeling that the character or the game is poor**. These four could be characterized as stress generated by internal experiences of the events or themes in the larp. We found four other distinct categories: events related to **design and practicalities of the larp**, **loneliness**, **demanding or distressing characteristics of the game**, and **harassment or insecurity**. These factors seemed less intercorrelated than the first cluster of stressors.

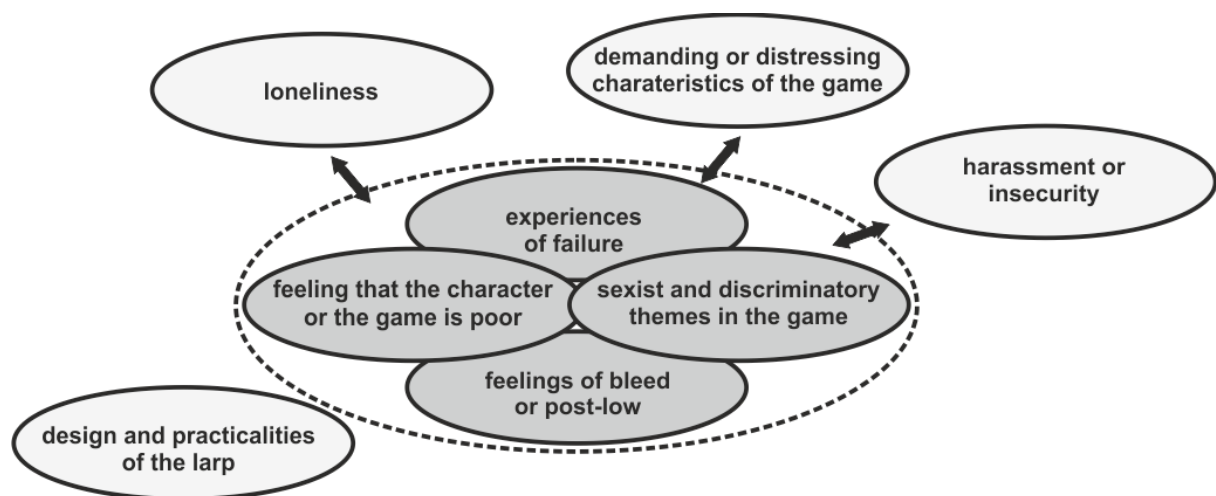


Figure 1. Factors of the larp-related stress according to preliminary analysis. Arrows denote relationships between the factors.

In terms of experienced stress on a scale from 0 to 10, larping seemed to be perceived as quite stressful (mean 5.2), but larpers also found themselves recovering from this stress

pretty rapidly. Based on a preliminary analysis, stressors groups **harassment or insecurity, sexist and discriminatory themes in the game** and **feelings of bleed or post-low** seemed to, on average, generate less stress than other stressors. We want to emphasize that these are averages and can be misleading: our data clearly shows that while most players do not experience harassment or feel insecure in larps, a minority of players seem to suffer a great deal of this type of stress. The players for whom harassment and insecurity is a large stressor, are generally women or of non-binary gender¹. For the most part, gender does not seem to play a large role in terms of what causes larpers stress nor how strongly it is perceived. However, when comparing the averages it is possible that men might experience less larp related stress than other genders, although we couldn't fully confirm this with our data. In contrast, age may affect on perceived stress: younger larpers seemed to experience more stress over loneliness, which is understandable as older larpers are likely to be more established in the community and have a larger circle of acquaintances there. Finally, larpers in relationships seemed to experience less larp-related stress than those not in a relationship.

Factors Predisposing Players to Stress

Five general background factors seemed to have the most impact on how much stress respondents reported: low self esteem, predisposition to anxiety, stress related to other aspects of life, poor experienced quality of life, and emotional instability.

Poor self-esteem is seen in many studies to be associated with stress, although it is not always evident whether experienced stress or failure to cope with it reduces self-esteem or vice versa. Low self-esteem may predispose people toward low self-efficacy and potentially inability to use more beneficial coping mechanisms for stress. Predisposition to anxiety can color a person's perception of whether future events are likely to be positive or potentially threatening. When more events are considered threatening, the number of potential stressors increases. Stress from other aspects of life likely increases larp-related stress by reducing the available mental, physical, and emotional resources available to manage larp-related stress. Poor quality of life is characterized by unhappiness related to some aspect of life: work, health, friendships and so forth. This unhappiness understandably reduces the resources available to cope with stress and may increase experienced stress. Finally, emotional instability² is characterized by frequency of changes in mood and the frequency of feelings worry and concern. This may either make larpers more sensitive to stress or reduce the amount of available mental resources to deal with stress.

¹ As the respondent pool is most likely white (given it is based on respondents who could understand Finnish), non-white ethnicity probably also predisposes to stress. However, our questionnaire did not have questions on race, skin color, or ethnicity, so we can only speculate.

² For emotional instability and other personality factors, we used the 50-item questionnaire from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP - <https://ipip.ori.org/> and Goldberg, L. R., Johnson, J. A., Eber, H. W., Hogan, R., Ashton, M. C., Cloninger, C. R., & Gough, H. C. (2006). The International Personality Item Pool and the future of public-domain personality measures. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40, 84-96.)

Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping

Larpers react to stress individually, even if we understand what may predispose them to it. Coping mechanisms are the varying means each individual uses subconsciously or on purpose to ameliorate the effects of stress. To assess this we used a battery of questions³ on what types of approaches respondents use to cope with stress and compared them to the reported stress symptoms.

The following maladaptive behaviours were all associated with more stress-related symptoms pertaining to larps:

- denial (not acknowledging the feelings of stress)
- avoidance (not confronting the feelings of stress)
- substance use
- externalization (blaming others)
- paralyzation (to avoid or to be incapable of taking an action related to stress)

In contrast, the following adaptive behaviors were not associated with more symptoms:

- humor
- planning or taking action to alleviate stress
- recognizing mistakes made and attempting to remedy them

Generally, the more adaptive coping strategies require more resources, while the maladaptive ones are often approaches that avoid confronting the feelings of stress. As expected, our data suggests maladaptive strategies are more common in larpers who reported more stress in their life, or who have poor self-esteem or a predisposition to anxiety. In short, larpers with fewer resources to cope with stress seem to often use maladaptive coping strategies, increasing the experienced stress even further.

Tips to Larpers and Larp Organizers

How to Recognize Larp-Related Stress

As understanding your strengths, weaknesses, and current psychological state allows you to plan your activities effectively, recognizing stress is also paramount for coping with it.

Larp-related stress seems to manifest in a similar way as stress from other sources. According to our data (Figure 2) there is a cluster of four symptom categories that seem interconnected: **depression**, **anxiety**, **physical symptoms** (such as loss of appetite, fatigue), and **sleep disturbances**. Another symptom category, which seems to be separate, is **tiredness** and **avoidance of social contacts**.

³ Coping was assessed using COPE-inventory; <http://www.midss.org/content/cope-inventory> (Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., & Weintraub, J. K. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 267-283.)

Keeping a diary of stress symptoms, eating habits or sleep rhythms and looking for changes could also be a useful tool for identifying how stress affects you. Looking back, you can learn from assessing when you've felt most or least stressed when larping. You can also monitor your body sensations and anxiety levels before and during the game, in order to take necessary actions to manage the stress levels, reduce symptoms, and calm your nervous system by e.g. doing breathing and mindfulness exercises. It is also worth paying attention on how you interpret stress related sensations - as positive excitation and excitement or negative and overwhelming symptoms.

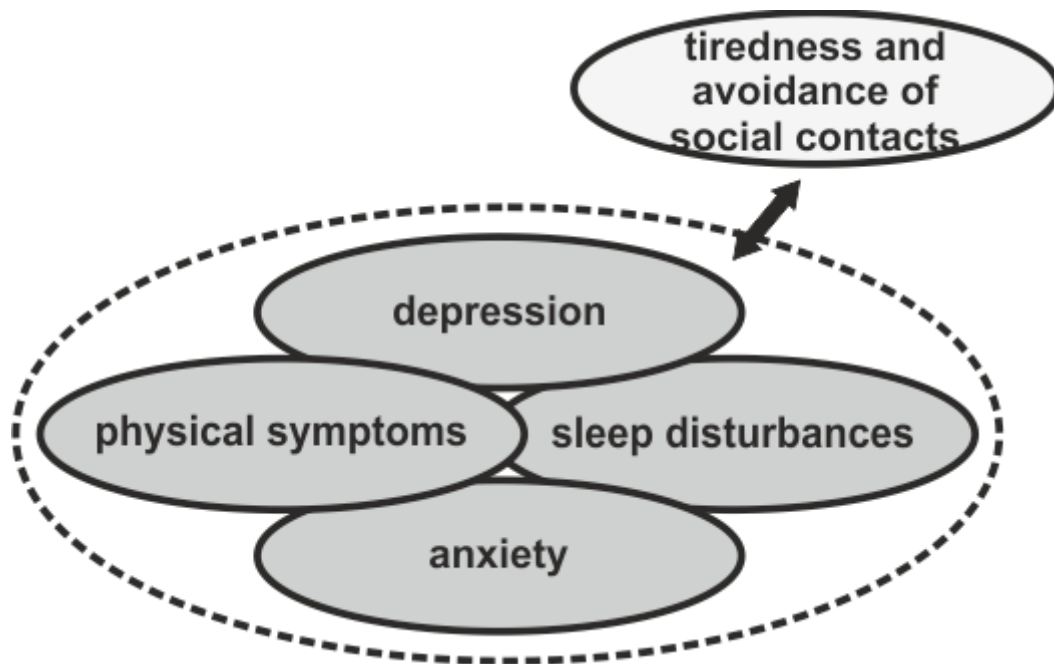


Figure 2. What larp related stress consists of. Arrows denote relationships between the factors.

How to Cope with Larp-Related Stress

For the most part, larps are moderately stressful but stress is not particularly long-lasting. For players predisposed to larp-related stress, the impact may be more significant and longer-lasting. Understanding your predisposition to stress and recognizing the larp-related stressors affecting you the most, can let you plan coping strategies as needed.

In our survey, almost 80 respondents told us in their own words how they actively dealt with stress. The actions people took for dealing with stress could be roughly divided to following categories: **planning ahead**, **reducing the stress related symptoms**, **controlling the source of stress**, **dealing with the emotion itself**, and **compensating for lost energy levels afterwards**. We believe that using several of these strategies in advance, during the game and after the event might help you to cope with larp-related stress.

The most common way of dealing with stress was talking to people: pondering, analyzing, and ranting with other larpers, friends, family, and organizers about the experience. Talking to people often does help in reframing the stressful situation and putting it into perspective. Other social coping strategies mentioned were actively seeking support as well as

socializing in general. This social support structure can give players the resources they need to be able to use more adaptive coping strategies that require them to confront the causes of stress and make plans for using mental resources to cope with it.

Players also reported using a wide range of internal strategies for dealing with feeling of stress. They could e.g. analyze and ponder the situation by themselves, write about their experiences, try to tolerate and accept the emotion, change their focus to something else, try to think positively, or lower their expectations. During the game players also dealt with stress by regulating their energy levels, arousal, and focus by, e.g., taking scheduled breaks and carefully picking the content they wanted to focus on. It is also worth mentioning that players found it necessary to sleep and rest, as well as eat and drink enough during the game to cope better. We can't agree less!

Some reported planning for upcoming stress or choosing the games carefully based on e.g. game's themes and design, to reduce the possibility of stressing too much. Few also seem to just admit that larping is a stressful, taxing and demanding activity, and to schedule themselves time for recuperating physically and mentally from the game. They did take a day or two off after the game to do pleasurable things: watch Netflix, sleep, do self care, and generally recharge. If you are planning to give the game your 100%, it might be a valid option to plan ahead your recovery!

Insights for Larp Organizers

As an organizer, the most obvious tool to reduce player stress is to streamline and simplify the practical arrangements for your game — food, housing, check-in processes, etc. However, practical issues are only one facet of larp-related stress. Organizers might find it useful to assess the demands of the game or of specific characters by estimating the possible amount of stress, so stress-prone players can plan ahead and make informed choices about whether to sign up for the game or ask for specific characters. While difficult, the pacing and structure of the game could be designed to allow sufficient time for recovery. Finally, organizers could especially pay attention to the experience of groups at elevated risk for experiencing stress (e.g. women, non-binary genders, sexual minorities) who are at risk of harassment or discrimination and planning the game structure to support them.

References

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Lin, N., Dean, A., & Ensel, W. M. (Eds.). (2013). *Social support, life events, and depression*. Academic Press.